

"SAFETY SUIT": A TRANSCULTURAL STUDENT COLLABORATION

by Lawrence Kyere e Rosa Pfluger



"Safety Suit" is a trans-cultural artwork that employs elements of Ghanaian and German dress and art cultures to respond critically to the multiple emergencies of the present, focusing on the themes of protection and fragility.

Working on an exhibition with an unfamiliar partner from a foreign country was quite a challenge for the both of us, but it definitely was an exciting one. Because of Rosa's fascination with crafts and design, she was keen to work with someone who specializes in the applied arts. With the help of Prof. Ernst Wagner and the platform "Exploring Visual Cultures", She got to know Prof. Osuanyi Essel, who teaches textile design at the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana. Prof. Essel contacted Lawrence, who is one of his students, told him about the project in Munich and asked him if he would like to join. Lawrence was happy to work with a student from Germany, thus Prof. Essel introduced us via video call in May 2020.

Since the start of this very ambitious and unique project at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, we were motivated and excited to share our ideas for the joint artwork. At the beginning, we exchanged common interests. We realized that both of us reference our respective traditions in our work. The first idea was to blend traditional textile patterns in a collage, in order to develop new, unconventional aesthetics. Lawrence introduced very colourful woven and printed fabrics from Ghana to the dialogue, like the Kente cloth, which holds an important position in



Lawrence Kyere, Rosa Pfluger: "Safety Suit", 2021, series of wearable objects made of foam and printed cloth. Copyright Rosa Pfluger.

the Ghanaian society, or the *tie'ndye* technique, which allows for vibrant colours to disperse and mix in more or less random patterns across the cloth. Lawrence added his very own technique to the mix: during his studies at the University of Education in Winneba, he developed a technique to transfer the traditionally woven Kente cloth into a digitally generated pattern, which can be printed on any textile available, democratizing the former noble and expensive cloth. In the context of our project, this technology greatly simplified our exchange, allowing Lawrence to email his designs, instead of sending printed textiles by mail. On the other hand, Rosa shared images of some of the fabrics traditionally worn in her region, like the Loden, a strong, dark grey felt cloth that is water-proof and very robust, as well as the typical

stitched ornaments often found on top of leather. Rosa originates from a quite traditional background, which is why she often references her own traditions in her sculptural work. This light-hearted creative dialogue changed drastically by the end of May 2020. When George Floyd was killed and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement dominated news headlines worldwide, it seemed unavoidable and it became our mission to take a stand and respond artistically to the current events. Especially in relation to our own cooperation, it seemed all the more absurd that such violence broke out elsewhere, just because of the difference in skin colour. News reports and press images from the BLM demonstrations form the basis for the design of "Safety Suit". During the often-violent protests, many protestors as well as police officers protected

themselves by wearing more or less professionally fabricated (and sometimes even entirely improvised) masks and protective bodywear. The work of the artist Franz Erhard Walther, who had a major retrospective exhibition at the *Haus der Kunst* in Munich at the time, also had an influence on the design language. Rosa began cutting and sawing shapes out of foam and Styrofoam. Meanwhile, Lawrence began designing the patterns that would later serve as covers for the individual parts of our joint artwork. Even though this plan was fixed, we kept exchanging and discussing current events. Of course, Covid-19 and climate change were also big topics that are deeply affecting us. It felt natural to expand the theme of protection. Lawrence decided to design another pattern to raise awareness of the dangers of the virus and the ac-

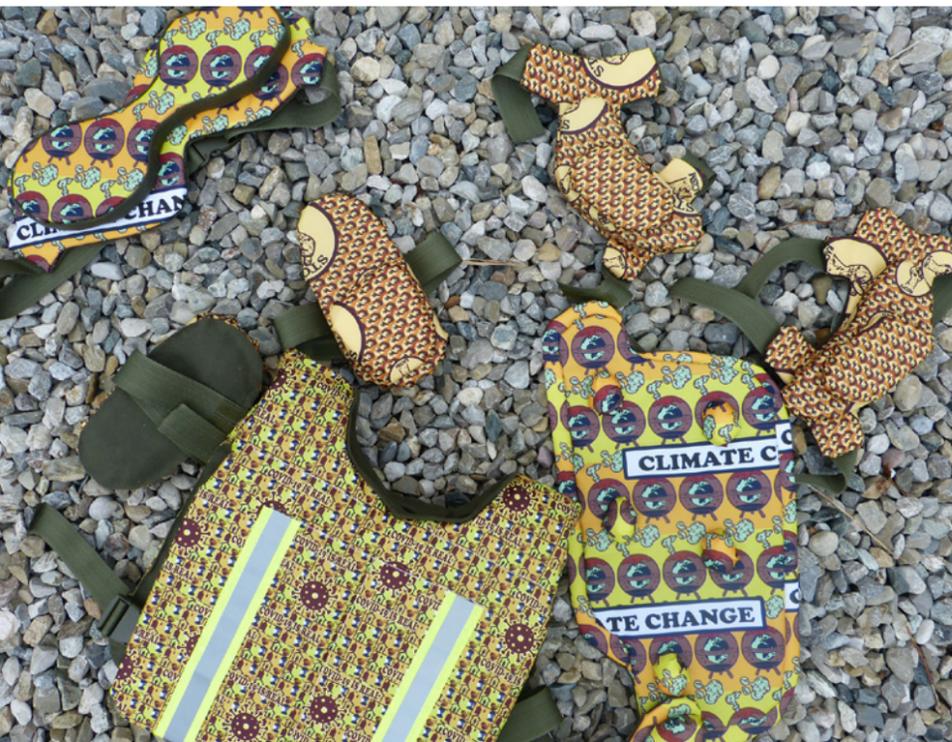
ording safety protocols. Lawrence's openness to work with topics or images that might seem obvious or bold and to react quickly to current events was new to Rosa and inspired her to approach things more directly, to get to the heart of the matter, instead of tiptoeing around it. During this time, we continued to exchange ideas about everyday life, news and socio-political issues. Thus, over time, the Coronavirus pandemic and climate change were added as topics.

The result is "Safety Suit", a series of wearable objects, resembling protective gear for sports or military use. These parts fit the human body, but they are also independent sculptural works in their own right, hinting at negative spaces, or imprints that a human body might have left behind. The surface of the back protectors, knee pads, elbow pads etc. is covered with three different colourful, pat-

terned fabrics whose motifs reveal political messages only at second glance: "STOP RACISM", "COVID-19 IS REAL," and "CLIMATE CHANGE." They contrast sharply with the camouflage patterns that otherwise cover military equipment. Details such as Velcro fasteners, buckles or reflectors refer to the functionality of the suit. The inside material of the objects makes them a lot lighter than one would expect, which also refers to their uselessness in terms of real, physical protection. "Safety Suit" is a mixture between Lawrence's patterns, colors and designs and Rosa's preferred artistic approach to create a series of prototypes from makeshift materials. We do not feel like this project is just a compromise between two independent strategies; each contribution can hold their own, but in the end, it is also more than what only one of us could have achieved.

"Safety Suit" symbolically stands for the vulnerability of the human body, for the naive and desperate search for protection and the question of what can really protect us from violence, natural disasters, illness and injustice. "Safety Suit" is only a simulation, an illusion of safety and leaves the space open for the viewer's own thoughts. The project ended (for the time being) with an exhibition titled "Back Coupling", taking place in three different exhibition spaces in Munich in the summer of 2021. "Safety Suit" was one of six works especially made for this exhibition of transcultural collaboration. The communication and exchange between a German and an international student was the common ground for all the art works.

www.explore-vc.org/en/objects/to-cut-to-the-chase-instead-of-tiptoeing-around-it.html



Safety Suit reminds of protective gear used in military or sports. There are protectors for the hands, knees, elbows, the head, back and upper body as well as more abstract, multi-use parts. In the image on the right, a visitor is trying out the knee protectors at the exhibition in Munich. Copyright Rosa Pfluger.



“Safety Suit”: una collaborazione interdisciplinare tra studenti

Le molteplici crisi che abbiamo affrontato negli ultimi anni hanno messo in evidenza i limiti dei nostri corpi e generato nuovi modi di immaginare la sicurezza. Nell'estate del 2020, alcuni studenti dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Monaco hanno deciso di organizzare una mostra di opere interdisciplinari realizzate da studenti tedeschi in collaborazione con partner stranieri. Questo articolo descrive la collaborazione tra Rosa Pfluger – studentessa di pedagogia dell'arte di Monaco e scultrice – e Lawrence Kyere – studente ghanese di design tessile e moda residente a Winneba. I due hanno sviluppato "Safety Suit": un progetto che combina scultura e design di moda nell'ideazione di una serie di dieci oggetti-abito, ispirati all'abbigliamento sportivo e militare. Quest'opera, esposta per la prima volta a Monaco a giugno 2021, presenta una doppia identità: ogni elemento dell'opera può essere indossato, ma è anche una scultura che fa riferimento all'impronta del corpo, uno spazio che l'autore e l'autrice chiamano "negativo". Pfluger ha progettato l'interno e i dettagli funzionali, mentre Kyere ha realizzato le stoffe colorate con cui sono rivestiti, che riprendono l'estetica tessile dell'Africa occidentale.

L'opera affronta le tematiche critiche della contemporaneità in chiave interculturale: dalla minaccia pandemica scatenata dal Covid-19, alle tensioni razziali cristallizzate nella morte di George Floyd, ma anche i cambiamenti climatici e il dramma della migrazione. Immagini di repertorio del movimento Black Lives Matter hanno ispirato i pattern di "Safety Suit". Ne emergono oggetti "porosi", che parlano al presente in un linguaggio immediato e "affettivo". Le opere-abito assorbono suggestioni culturali ghanesi e tedesche ibridandole in modo giocoso ma rilevante per la riflessione socio-culturale che le ispira. Esse giocano con i paradigmi dell'apparire e le tradizioni del vestire per provocare una riflessione sull'insensatezza delle strategie di difesa con cui cerchiamo di difenderci da minacce reali e immaginarie. Proprio l'inefficacia degli abiti di "Safety Suit" – nessuno dei quali funziona davvero come scudo protettivo – svela l'aporia tra percezione e realtà e la vulnerabilità di qualsiasi armatura in un mondo sempre più interconnesso, fisico, palpabile e altrettanto instabile e idiosincratico. Lo scopo è dimostrare che la vera sicurezza si raggiunge solo attraverso la collaborazione, l'egualianza e la comunicazione.

Lawrence Kyere

is a Fashion Design and Textile Education graduate of the University of Education Winneba. He is interested in textile design and computer-aided fabric design. He recently launched his own clothing brand called "B3rma".

Rosa Pfluger

is an artist based near Munich, who creates prototypes, observations, and tools inspired by her rural surroundings. Her attempt to uncover traps or illusions in order to enable a new, sometimes unconventional or ironic view, is crucial to her work. Her favourite methods include bricolage, improvisation, DIY-mentality and research.

"Safety Suit" is an artwork created by Lawrence Kyere and Rosa Pfluger for a transcultural student collaboration project launched by Munich's Academy of Fine Arts. It is a series of wearable sculptural objects inspired by racial violence and other contemporary emergencies that comments on fragility and safety. Via the material figure of the protective gear, it aims to demonstrate that only communication, collaboration and equality can help us to achieve real safety.

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